



The Fine Line

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A NOTE TO THE READER

We all have a context—a history, some might call it. The book you're about to read and the author who wrote it are no exception.

First, the book.

Over fifty years ago Yale professor H. Richard Niebuhr published a seminal book. When *Christ and Culture* was released, it rocked the church and the world. Niebuhr's work, regarded as "one of the most vital books of our time,"¹ has dominated the conversation for nearly six decades. For many Christians the book scratched their itch about how to live in the world but not of the world. Niebuhr proved to be the voice for his generation and then some. His five models for understanding a Christian's role in culture are still discussed and debated in the halls of academia today.

Although Niebuhr and his models are still worthy, our world has changed. Now it's time for our generation to re-envision what it means to live in the world but not be of the world. We need to unravel the fine line and discover how to be committed to both our Christianity and our culture. And so this book presents a new model for a new generation.

If you're reading this book within the context of a group, I invite

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you to interact with the discussion questions at the end of the book. My guess is that they'll keep the conversation flowing.


Now, the author part.

I tell people I'm a professional Christian. Don't be too impressed. It just means I'm a pastor. I've served at Grace Church in Powell, Ohio, for the last seven years, and I've done pretty much everything there, including donating my old Dodge Spirit to be smashed on the last night of youth group. The things we justify in the name of outreach.

I'm not exempt from the irrelevant tendencies I discuss in the book. In fact, I know some of them all too well. Still, both I and the people I run with strive to live as Transformists. We long to be a community of faith that discovers the fine line and then camps right smack in the middle of this sophisticated paradox. My guess is that this is your longing too.

I'll look for you there.

THE PHONE IS RINGING



Skating rinks.

Who doesn't love these wonderful, wretched institutions? I think I started and ended more middle school "relationships" there than I care to remember.

The distinct sound of the air hockey puck smacking against the table, the smell of buttery popcorn at the snack bar, and the feel of those worn tan skates with bright orange wheels—these memories define my early adolescent years.

Of course, my parents allowed me to attend only "Christian" skate nights. My virgin ears weren't allowed to hear the likes of Madonna or Color Me Badd. But even these sanctified skate nights had their limits. Every Thursday at the stroke of nine, the disc jockey switched the music from Christian back to secular. That's when my friends and I had better be out of the building or else we would promptly turn into pumpkins.

For some reason on one particular night I lingered past the safety of 9:00 p.m. Maybe my laces got tangled. Maybe my friend's mom forgot to pick us up.

I can't remember.

What I do remember are the lyrics from that one song, that

“secular” song: “That’s me in the corner, that’s me in the spotlight, losing my religion.”

I felt like Judas when I heard it, like I was betraying the faith. Although the song sounded irreligious, I couldn’t deny that something about the plaintive voice coming through the speakers at the skating rink that night resonated with me. The song put words to feelings lodged deep within me. Whether the band R.E.M. intended it or not, I viewed the song as a type of psalm boldly declaring doubts and concerns.

I didn’t know much about the band at the time, but an entire generation latched on to that song, evidenced by the fact that in 1991, R.E.M. won a Grammy Award for Best Pop Performance and “Losing My Religion” is listed as #169 on *Rolling Stone’s* five hundred greatest songs of all time.

All I knew was that lead singer Michael Stipe had a unique voice and R.E.M. a unique sound, at least compared to the Christian songs popular during the early nineties. I think Michael W. Smith’s “cross-over” song “Place in This World” was about as edgy as things got back then.

Stipe’s haunting voice and penetrating lyrics stuck with me for months, re-creating in me the same side effect I feel when I eat one too many barbecue ribs at summer cookouts: heavy and lethargic—no touch football after lunch.

Odd, isn’t it? Here I was an eighth grader caught somewhere between two songs, echoing the cries of two Michaels. At that time in my life, I often prayed to God that he would show me *my place in this world* while feeling that I was *losing my religion*.

Sometimes things don’t change much.

Fast-forward a whole bunch of years and I am still caught between the same two songs. I’m still waiting for the angst to end. I know Jesus and I love Jesus more today than I did back in that skat-

ing rink many years ago, but today it seems as though I have more questions about Christianity than answers.

I'm not happy about my angst. And if it were possible, I wish I could go back to a time when everything was black and white and simple, to the time when life was easily categorized like the music in the skating rink: Christian or secular. I think back to that time, somewhere in my childhood, when making Bible characters out of Popsicle sticks was about as complicated as life got.

Even though I'm thirty-one, I'm still trying to find my place in this world. Shouldn't I know by now what I want to be when I grow up?

But it's bigger than simply what I want to do in the future. It's also about how I should live now. I want to be relevant to the world, to impact it, and maybe even transform it. At the same time, I don't want to look just like the world looks.

This tension isn't unique to middle school skaters. It's the unavoidable tension that exists for each of us who believe in the God of the Bible. Jesus addressed this tension when he instructed his followers about their relationship with the world. He told them to be *in* the world but not *of* it.

As if that makes things a whole lot clearer. Or easier.

One thing is certain: there's a fine line between *in* and *of*. In my life I've tried to avoid this tension; I've pretended this fine line doesn't exist. But pretending doesn't make the tension go away. It only makes *us* go away—one more irrelevant Christian.

I'm pretty sure this tension that's been with me from childhood until now isn't going away anytime soon. Discovering the fine line between *in the world* and *of the world* isn't easy, but I have to try. I don't want to be caught living a lie—or manufacturing one. If you're like me, then you're willing to explore this tension and you're willing to pay the cost of living with this tension.

At certain times throughout history, Christians avoided the

tension and, as we'll see in our story, the church and the world suffered because of it. Living a lie prevents people from living free.

At other times, people ventured into the unknown and celebrated the mystery instead of suppressing it. Within the process, some lost their religion. Others not only found their place in the world but, more importantly, they found Jesus.

In my life there have been a few times when things took a big turn. Most of the time these turns were quite unexpected. You could even say they happened on ordinary days.

One time it happened after my wife, Kelly, took a pregnancy test. Her giddy smile left me in a daze for a couple days. Another time it happened after I opened the mailbox. The letter confirmed the military's rejection of me serving as a chaplain. And still another time it happened through a phone call. I was offered a new position in a new state. Five months later we arrived in Columbus, Ohio, and began driving down different roads, shopping at a different grocery store, and breathing in a different neighbor's smoke through our apartment vents.

Although these big changes happened in a variety of ways, one thing was similar in every case: these changes all started with dialogue.

The little plastic pregnancy test spoke. We shouted.

The letter from the military offered condolences. I cried.

And the last: the phone rang. I picked it up.

Remember that chilling scene in *The Matrix* when Neo, played by Keanu Reeves, receives an unexpected package on a very ordinary day? He gingerly opens the flap and a cell phone slides into his hand. Immediately, it starts to ring. He has a hunch about the purpose of the call. It concerns the explanation of the Matrix. But now Neo has a choice. Will he answer the phone or ignore the call? If he enters into the dialogue, his predictable life will be forever changed.

The Phone Is Ringing

And so it is with this story—it's a kind of call too. But it's about something more complicated than even the Matrix. It's about living *in* the world without being *of* the world. It's about the tension we must live with and fight through. It's about “the fine line.”

Now that you've gingerly opened this book, you too have a choice.

The phone is ringing. Will you answer it?


PART I

THE BATTLE LINES

*It is well that war is so terrible—
otherwise we would grow too fond of it.*

Robert E. Lee

WALKING THE LINE



Ask anyone who's single: there's a fine line between friendly and flirtatious.

Ask any athlete: there's a fine line between confidence and arrogance.

Ask any Christ-follower: there's a fine line between being *in* the world and being *of* the world.

The danger of walking the line is that we may accidentally cross it—wherever the line is. This fear often makes us shrink back and fall prey to the other extreme and become, in the case of the single, shy; the athlete, timid; and the believer, irrelevant.

Then what?

People miss out on having healthy friendships. Fans miss out on celebrating victories with their team. And the world misses out on seeing the kingdom of God on earth.

Discovering this fine line is difficult but not impossible. All who follow Jesus must wrestle with this question and emerge with some kind of answer. This question of relevance, as author and journalist Michael Joseph Gross put it, is “the most basic ethical question of the Christian faith.”¹

I've seen enough of the next generation leaving the church.

THE BATTLE LINES

According to some estimates, 58 percent of young adults who attended church at eighteen no longer attend by age twenty-nine. This number accounts for more than eight million twentysomethings who are simply “missing in action.”²

Why are so many from this generation voting on spiritual matters with their absence?

Perhaps it has something to do with the fact that there is little difference between the attitudes and actions of believers and unbelievers. Rather than drawing people to Christ, many Christians are pushing people away because of the disconnection between what we say and how we live.

That cannot continue.

Christ-followers are supposed to be the most liberated, grace-filled people on earth. We’re supposed to have what people want—a message so powerful it will cause the dead to rise and the blind to see. We’re supposed to have the living God living inside us. We’re supposed to know how to live in the world but not be of it.

Most believers I know *don’t* know. Most are either living *out* of the world or they’re *of* the world. No wonder Christians have so little impact, so little relevance. Now more than ever, we need to understand how to live in the world but not be of it.

And that’s exactly what this book will do: help you discover the fine line.